

Everything is Not a Process

Products, Games and Emerging Metaphors for Work

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There are many ways to describe this magazine. A reader might say it is a compilation of news, guidance, and ideas related to defense acquisitions. To an accountant, this is \$2 worth of wood pulp and ink. A physicist might see an assembly of 100 trillion atoms and point out that like all matter, it is mostly empty space. A retro survivalist who still reads the print version probably sees a convenient fire starter, although of course an increasing number of readers only know this as a PDF file, which would be no help at all as kindling.

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PRODUCT



The point is, the context and needs of our situation will determine which description is most useful and relevant. But regardless of which description you prefer, one thing is for certain: this magazine is not a process.

Now, a magazine could be described as the result of a process, the product which comes out at the end of a sequence of related activities. It could be used in a classroom as a component of a learning process or in a campfire as part of a combustion process. But a magazine itself is not a process. It's a product. This is an important distinction.

I bring this up because it is popular in some circles to say "Everything is a process." However, we've already shown that statement is demonstrably false. Some things, such as this magazine, are not processes.

No doubt the intent of saying “Everything is a process” is to assert that every activity is a process, excluding things like magazines. But even that modified assertion paints with an excessively broad brush. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that every series of actions can be described as a process. I’d be the first to admit such a description is often useful. But let me suggest it is equally important to describe activities in other, non-process frameworks as well.

Sloppy semantics aside, there is a real danger when we describe “everything” as a process, particularly if we think process descriptions are the definitive way to represent a series of related tasks. It is a very short step from “Everything is a process” to “Everything is only a process” or even “The process is everything.” Here there be dragons.

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The assertion that “everything is a process” is hugely problematic for several reasons, not least of which is that such a description risks losing focus on the product. Consider this: if everything is a process, then anything that isn’t a process is nothing. Products are not processes. Therefore, products are nothing. And while no one would deliberately ignore the product, our mental framework affects our behavior in interesting ways. As I explained in “Metaphors Are Mindfunnels” (November–December 2008), metaphors shape our perception, which drives our thoughts and actions. The *process is everything* description leads to a not-so-subtle pressure to focus on Everything (i.e., process) rather than Nothing (i.e., product). Dysfunction ensues.

Naturally, some might object that the product has a central place in a process description. The entire point of a process is typically to produce something, so the product is simply one part of the process. In fact, some might even argue that a good process is tightly focused on the output. Yes, yes, I’m sure that’s true. However, in practice, it’s embarrassingly easy to get distracted by various diagrams and process-centric activities, relegating the output to a secondary consideration.

It’s a question of focus. Should we put the weight of our attention on the process or the result? Process advocates assert that by focusing on the process we automatically improve the outcome. That may be the case in some instances, but it is by no means a guarantee. For that matter, I’m not sure it’s even *likely*. Other people, including this author, argue the *outcome* should be primary, with process a secondary consideration. Of course, this is not a binary choice; we can and should pay attention to both. However, since there is only room for one Most Important Thing, I contend that Thing should be the product, not the process.

As stated earlier, there are actually several flaws with the “everything is a process” concept. Along with derogating the importance of the output, this approach also tends to focus on external, measurable components, while ignoring or down-playing anything that can’t be captured in a diagram.

Consider a game of soccer. We could certainly describe it as a process, beginning with the referee’s whistle, followed by players in their assigned roles running up and down the field, kicking the ball toward a goal, and ending with the final whistle. We might step back further and include recruiting, training, coaching, and even advertising as part of our soccer process enterprise. But perhaps there are other, better ways to describe this series of related tasks. Perhaps we could describe soccer as... a game.

If we look at soccer as merely a process, we risk missing out on some of its more subjective aspects, the passion and the sweat, the carefree pointlessness of casual sport or the glorious geopolitical significance of hostile nations meeting on a field of friendly strife. The process description can never account for these elements, nor for what psychology professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls “flow,” the interior experience where a person is fully immersed and playing at the very edge of their skill level. This inability to capture such critical aspects of sport is a significant poverty of the process-centric worldview.

In a similar sense, consider music. We could easily describe a song as a process, a series of musical notes played in sequence to create a pleasing sound. We might step back further and include composition, rehearsal, recording, and marketing as part of our musical process enterprise.

Or we could look at music as something that, like sport, *transcends* process. A player piano can be programmed to produce a sequence of sounds, but it will lack a certain inexplicable element that a human virtuoso brings to the performance. Different musicians playing the same song can produce quite different performances, and the exact same performance by any single musician will produce vastly dissimilar reactions in listeners, depending on the memories associated with a particular tune.

The point is an activity can be described as a process—but that is not the *only* way to describe it. In some cases, it is not the *best* way to describe it. Process descriptions focus on the visible, the tangible, and the obvious. Such an approach has merit but is ill suited to deal with the ephemeral, hidden aspects of life—and in many cases, that’s where the interesting stuff happens.

Which brings us (finally!) to defense acquisitions. While we often talk about the acquisition process, this descriptive framework is needlessly and inappropriately limiting. Focusing on process can cause us to overlook critical aspects in acquisition, just as it would in sport or music.

The truth is, when we describe acquisition as a process we are using a metaphor. To once again borrow from “Metaphors Are Mindfunnels,” a metaphor involves describing one thing in terms of something else. It is important to understand that metaphors both reveal and conceal aspects of the thing being described. Mistaking a metaphorical description for a literal one means we remain blind to the concealed aspects. This blindness can lead to all sorts of unproductive actions and decisions.

There are other approaches, other metaphors to consider, when talking about acquisition. We could describe it as a journey, for example. A journey is a series of steps that involve moving from one location or situation to another. Like a process, journeys involve related activities and an objective/destination. Unlike a process, a journey is more organic, more unique, and less predictable. A journey can be mapped, but unlike a process map, a journey’s map only aims to convey part of the story. Such a map portrays topology, not experience—and when you’re on a journey, the experience is just as important as the geography.

One of the more intriguing metaphors for work to emerge in recent years is to describe it as a game. Jane McGonigal is a leading expert on “gamification,” and her outstanding book *Reality Is Broken* explains the benefits of such a metaphor. Explaining the benefits of a game metaphor, McGonigal writes “by removing or limiting the obvious ways of getting to the goal, the rules push players to explore previously uncharted possibility spaces. They unleash creativity and foster strategic thinking.” This is very much in line with the concept that “constraints foster creativity,” which is central to the FIST (Fast, Inexpensive, Simple, Tiny) approach to acquisition. In our current financial environment, such an approach is critical; the defense acquisition community desperately needs both thrift and creativity. A game metaphor not only helps explain how this approach can work but actually helps *make it work* by shifting our perception and helping us understand the benefits of limits.

McGonigal goes on to write that a “game must be carefully designed so that the only way to be rewarded is to participate in good faith—rather than on providing compensation for doing

Some Additional Commentaries on Process

The phrase “everything is a process” isn’t the only problematic truism found within the process-centric community. Let’s take a look at a few others.

A bad process is better than no process.

A bad process is better than no process in the same way that a road heading in the wrong direction is better than no road at all. If all you’re concerned about is a smooth ride and high rate of travel, then any road will do. But if you care about your destination at all, the wrong road is vastly inferior to an unpaved trail that leads to the right place.

The thing is, when a process goes bad, it generally sets up barriers to smart actions, hinders creativity and initiative, and reduces accountability. (Dilbert, anyone?) In other words, bad processes get in the way of good work and set you off in the wrong direction. As I explained in “The Truth About Process Loss Cost” (September-October 2008), the cost of compliance with a bad process may exceed the cost of the negative outcome we’re trying to avoid. An absent process may not offer much help and guidance, but at least it doesn’t get in the way or codify perverse incentives.

If you can’t describe what you are doing as a process, you don’t know what you’re doing.

— W. Edwards Deming

In a certain sense, Deming is correct. An inability to describe our activities probably indicates a lack of a conscious, intellectual understanding of the activity. But just because you don’t “know” what you’re doing doesn’t mean you aren’t good at it. As Donald Schon wrote in *The Reflective Practitioner*, “competent practitioners usually know more than they can say.” The late Col. John Boyd described this type of practical competence as *fingerspitzengefühl* (“fingertip feel”).

With all due respect to the eminent Dr. Deming, it’s entirely possible to be intuitively effective, to have a dependable gut-feel on how to get things done that exceeds one’s descriptive powers. The mechanism may be entirely mysterious to the one doing it, but the mystery does not rule out results. The good doctor is technically correct—understanding what we’re doing allows us to describe it as a process—but describing and knowing are not the point. Doing is. Further, his implication that absent a process description our effort will necessarily be inadequate does not exactly hold water.

A rigorous process is designed to stand up to scrutiny and oversight.

Sadly, processes are often designed in order to C our collective A’s. Some people seem to take comfort in an ability to hold up process compliance as a talisman when performance outcomes are poor. No one can be blamed for bad results when they can honestly assert “I followed the process.” Any unsatisfactory outcomes are obviously the process’ fault, not the person’s.

In truth, a process should be designed to improve our outcomes, not as a CYA mechanism. Standing up to scrutiny and oversight isn’t the point. Delivering meaningful results is.

We can continue to improve our processes indefinitely.

As long as we don’t mind getting smacked in the face by the Law of Diminishing Returns, we can improve our processes indefinitely. Any process with an optimization point can get ever closer to perfection. However, each improvement has both a cost and a benefit. At some point, the next increment of improvement costs more than it delivers.

Once again, the point isn’t to improve our processes but to improve our outcomes. Process improvement is a wonderful thing when the result is increased efficiency and/or better products. Process improvement for its own sake, however, is the very definition of waste.

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something that would otherwise feel boring, trivial or pointless." This is good advice for anyone in the business of creating business processes, and doubly so for the acquisition community.

We don't need to limit ourselves to a single metaphor. In fact, using multiple metaphors can increase our understanding of the world around us and help us make wiser decisions. Therefore, it is neither advisable nor necessary to stop talking about the "acquisition process." The trick is to make sure that is not the only way we describe it. It is equally wise to talk about the acquisition journey, experience or even (gasp!) game.

Conclusion

Everything is not a process. While there are many benefits to using the "acquisition is a process" metaphor, such an approach also has limitations and flaws; it should therefore not be the only way we describe the work we do. Acquisition leaders would be well served to consider complimentary descriptions, to include a gamified approach, when making decisions and taking action.

Ultimately, whether we call it a process, a journey, or a game, acquisition is something we do in order to deliver weapons, systems, and services. Anything which distracts from those deliveries has a negative impact on our performance. The all-too-common belief that everything is a process is just such a distraction.

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To My Readers

After writing nearly 60 articles, comics, and stories for *Defense AT&L* over the past 9 years, I've decided to take a break. Writing these pieces has been tremendously rewarding and educational for me—and a lot of fun. I particularly enjoyed connecting with so many readers, both digitally and in person. But for a variety of reasons, including my imminent deployment, I've shelved any plans to write for this magazine for the foreseeable future.

Now, there is nothing a writer treasures more than a good editor and a forum for publication. Working with the professionals at *Defense AT&L* since 2002 gave me all that and more. I still can't believe how lucky I've been. This magazine has been very good to me, and the decision to stop wasn't an easy one. But it is the right one for now.

I don't plan to stop writing entirely; in fact, I just might end up writing more than ever. I've got a book project or two in the works and hope to publish a few articles in other outlets. I may even do an occasional piece for *AT&L*, but for now, most of my writing efforts will be directed elsewhere.

I wish you all the best; keep fighting the good fight!

—Dan